

Mountain Whitefish - Idaho's Unsung Native

While most Idaho anglers sing the praises of salmon, steelhead and resident trout, only a handful focus much attention on another member of the trout family, the mountain whitefish. Whitefish are more widely distributed and occur in higher numbers than any other member of Idaho's trout/salmon family. Despite their abundance, whitefish are either overlooked or avoided by Idaho anglers because – despite their kinship – they don't resemble or fight like a trout.

Mountain whitefish tend to be more abundant than trout, in part because they produce so many eggs. Spawning in October and November, whitefish may deposit 20,000 to 40,000 eggs, compared with 2,000 to 4,000 for an average trout. Whitefish can also live more than 15 years and can tolerate warmer water than most trout.

Although whitefish do not jump like a trout when on the end of your line, they do put up a pretty fair fight. To target whitefish with a rod and reel, remember that they tend to run in schools during most of the year, usually in pools and deeper runs below fast water riffles. In winter months, this schooling behavior becomes even stronger. So when you find one whitefish, you have probably found a bunch.



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Mountain whitefish are best pursued using small hooks fished near the bottom of deep pools

Because so few anglers target mountain whitefish, they represent an underutilized harvest opportunity for anglers desiring to take some fish home. In most locations, whitefish limits are 25 per day. If keeping whitefish is of no interest, you may choose to pursue them on a catch and release basis.

Whitefish tend to focus their feeding on aquatic insects, on or near the river bottom. To catch them, bait anglers fish on the bottom, using smaller hooks with grubs, a single salmon egg or a small piece of worm. Fly anglers often use weight to get a midge, caddis or even stonefly imitation near the bottom. In the summer, whitefish can be found feeding on small mayflies at the tailouts of pools or runs, making them vulnerable to a well-placed dry fly.

If you keep some whitefish for eating, they can be prepared using just about any trout recipe. Whitefish have a slightly higher oil content to their flesh, making them great for smoking, and they are delicious battered and deep fried. And folks who enjoy pickled fish swear by pickled whitefish.